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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the issues involved in releasing test results to the press. The first part is based on a survey of National Association of Test Directors members (72 of the 142 members completed a questionnaire on reporting test results to the public). The survey included the following: to whom are results reported; what kind of results are reported; how are results reported; relations with the press; the most commonly asked questions; problems in dealing with the press; what information would you most like to communicate; and useful techniques in dealing with the press. The second part is based on interviews with members of the news media. It discusses some advice that they have for test directors on such questions as: why are test scores news; what kind of information can help the reporter write a better story; how would the reporter prefer to be given testing information; how does one deal with what seems to be a reporter's negative bias; what to do about misleading headlines, how to cope with reporters who don't know much about testing; and other suggestions for test directors. (PN)

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Reporting Test Results to the Public: Exploring the Doughnut

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School system test results are generally a topic of great interest to the local press. That great interest can in turn be a source of both gladness and consternation to test directors. This paper examines some of the issues involved in releasing test results to the press. The first part is based on a survey of National Association of Test Directors (NATD) members (72 of the 142 members completed a questionnaire on reporting test results to the public). The questionnaire dealt with the kinds of data that are reported, problems that are encountered, and techniques which members have found helpful in dealing with the press. The second part is based on interviews with members of the news media and discusses some advice that they have for test directors.

Part 1: NATD Member Survey

To whom are results reported?

Everyone responding to the survey reported spending at least some time with newspaper reporters. On a scale from 1 (sustantial time) to 5 (no time), NATD members spend about equal amounts of time reporting to parents (mean = 2.6) and newspaper reporters (mean = 2.7). In contrast, means for community leaders and TV/radio journalists were both 3.3.

Most of the respondents report test scores to the press as a matter of course. The others (about 22% of all respondents) do so only if asked.

What kind of results are reported?

Data are most commonly released to the press by grade (92% of the members reported that they released results by grade). School level data and longitudinal data are given to the press by 81% and 72% of the respondents, respectively. Between 10 and 25% of those surveyed released data by sub-district or area, by race, or by sex. Only one in eight respondents report school rankings to the press.

How are results reported?

About half the districts hold formal press conferences at which their test scores are released. Twenty-eight percent release test results at board meetings at which members of the press are present. Nearly two-thirds send out press releases on test results and most district (71%), report informal meetings with reporters.

Although the chief spokesperson for the school system at press conferences on test results is only rarely the test director (only 7 of the 72 respondents), the test directors and research staff are frequently the people who handle follow-up questions from reporters.

Relations with the press

Test directors were generally content with their relations with the news media. With only a handful of exceptions, they rated their school system's relationship with the news media middling or better. On a scale of 1 (excellent) to 5 (extremely poor), 68 of the 72 respondents rated their relationships with the presss a 3 or better; the mean response was 2.1.

The group of test directors was more neutral toward the amount of attention they get from the news media. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being too much and 5 being far too little, the mean for the group was 2.6. Extreme responses to this question were infrequent; none thought that they got far too little attention from the news media, while five rated the amount of attention as far too much.

Respondents to the questionnaire were also essentially neutral with regard to the extent to which they get the attention they get from the news media is the kind that they want. The mean on the five-point scale (1 = exactly the kind of attention you want, 5 = not at all the kind of attention) was 2.7.

The most commonly asked questions

The questions that reporters ask most often fall into four broad categories. The first deals with questions like, "How do you account for these results?" or "What are the reasons for the gains (or decrease)?" About half the respondents listed questions of this nature. About thirty percent are asked questions that begin, "How do we compare to...." Fifteen percent were asked whether scores went up or down and just under fifteen percent are asked for information on how individual schools ranked.

Problems in dealing with the press

Responses to the question "What are the most serious problems that you have faced when dealing with the press?" are summarized in Table 1.

The most likely source of friction or disagreement with the press paralleled the problems: incorrect or superficial interpretations, over-emphasis on comparisons, misquotes, misleading headlines, timing, and the perception that the media try to create controversies and emphasize the negative. Several people reported that they had been accused of withholding or concealing data. In fact, there are certain kinds of data which <u>are</u> withheld (31 of the respondents reported that they withheld at least some data). Most often these data are scores by racial/ethnic group or school-by-school data (including school rankings), although some districts try to withhold other score breakdowns by sex, grade-equivalents, and data based on small numbers of students.

TABLE 1

Problems Reported

Problems	Frequency
1. Misinterpretation of results (over-emphasizing the inportance of small changes, the tendency to equate good scores with good schools, over-simplifying the results).	17
2. Bias/distortion (sensationalism, misleading headlines, emphasis on the negative).	14
3. Inaccuracies (misquotes, taking statements out of context, factual errors, omissions).	13
4. Lack of understanding of testing and terminology (sometimes complicated by having to deal with reporters who are not used to coverinq education).	13
5. Timing (wantinq results before they're available or before they've been given to the board; scooping the press conference).	9
6. Comparison with other districts.	5
7. Press tries to rank schools within the district.	5

What information would you most like to communicate?

The most frequent answers to this question were "anything positive" and the idea that test scores only give part of the picture, i.e., that schools should not be judged solely by the students' test scores. The issue of keeping things in perspective was predominant. One respondent pointed out that "test scores are not box scores." Another said that reporters should be exploring the doughnut rather than yelling about the hole. Others wanted more emphasis on factors that led up to the test scores; the purpose, limitations, and constructive use of tests; and longitudinal data that show progress over a period of years. Other information that test directors would like to communicate include the parent's role in testing; technical issues dealing with the meaning of test scores; reasons for testing and how the results are used; and CRT and competency test results.

Wanting to communicate information and actually succeeding in doing so are two different things. Of the 32 respondents who reported techniques for getting wanted attention from the press, the greatest number mentioned developing a good relationship with reporters and editors, keeping in touch with the press on a regular basis, and having the facts ready for the press, preferably in the form of news releases. Other suggestions include suggesting specific stories, trying to accommodate reporters' deadlines, emphasizing the positive uses of tests and holding study sessions for reporters interested in learning about educational measurement.

Useful techniques in dealing with the press

When asked to list techniques helpful when dealing with the media, the most response was honesty: "Be honest. Tell all (the good and the bad)". Or "Be perfectly frank and don't try to hide anything. When our district had this policy (previous administration) relations were much better." Of course,

there may be special conditions under which honesty is easier and works better: "Absolute honesty, complete cooperation, and improving test scores have been helpful."

A number of test directors reported that meeting informally with reporters was helpful for them. Informal meetings were used to teach reporters about testing, to present facts on the misuse of test scores, to "show how the lowest scoring school district in the county can have the highest quality program (and vice versa)."

Informal meetings were also one way of developing a good rapport between the school system and reporters. In a similar vein, others mentioned a "non-belligerent approach," remaining positive, or a "friendly, open and cooperative approach." Other helpful techniques mentioned by three or more test directors include: providing complete information in written form; taking time to answer all questions; presenting understandable data in a clear and easy format; good visuals; and using concrete and simple examples to illustrate points.

Only three responses suggested a less than open and friendly relationship with the news media. Perhaps those directors had had problems with being candid.

Part 2: Views from the Media

Why are test scores news?

The basic reason that the annual release of test scores is newsworthy is because it is the only readily available, objective measure of the school system's progress. One reporter expressed an interest in having other measures, but that none had been forthcoming. A second reporter denied that the test score releases were news per se (although his paper always runs stories about them). He felt that the only thing that was newsworthy was changes in test scores.

What kind of information can help the reporter write a better story?

There were a number of responses: concise, informative press releases; good graphics; information comparing your scores with other cities' (or why such comparisons can't be made); sample test questions; statements on why and how tests are used; what test scores mean; what steps were taken to improve student performance; answering the reporters' questions fully.

How would the reporter prefer to be given testing information?

The resounding answer: well in advance of his or her deadline. Reporters need lead time to make sense of all the numbers, to write a good story to seek out information for associated stories (e.g., profiles of schools that did well). Newspapers need time to typeset and proofread lists of test scores and to produce charts to graphs. TV stations need time to produce graphics and get their cameras to schools.

One strategy that can work well is the embargo. Trustworthy members of the press and electronic media are given the test results and press release with the specific understanding that the scores are not to be made public until a specific time and date, usually at an official press conference held a few days after they get their materials. The extra time, along with informal background conferences with testing staff, helps to ensure accurate reports.

Who gets the embargoed materials? That depends on the medium. For newspapers, the reporter would be the appropriate person. In dealing with television stations, talk to the assignment manager and ask whether he or she wants you to give the material to the executive producer or directly to the reporter.

If you want extensive newspaper coverage, it's best to avoid releasing results at a time that would cause them to appear in "skinny" editions of the newspaper (often Tuesday or Saturday).

How does one deal with what seems to be a reporter's negative bias?

Provide as much information as possible and be specific. Emphasize that test scores are not the be all and end all; put them into context by giving other information about schools (e.g., drop out rates; attendance data). Give evidence that good things are happening in the school system. If possible, mention specific schools or programs.

Anticipate that data won't be accepted at face value. It's a good idea to line up experts in the community (ideally, university professors who specialize in testing) to comment on your test results (obviously you should receive their permission in advance). This enable you to say to the reporter, "You don't have to take our word for it"; why don't you contact [name of local testing hotshot]? He can verify what we've said." The implicit message to the reporter is that your information is accurate and that you're not trying to hide anything.

What do we do about misleading headlines?

Assuming that you've had problems in the past, nicely approach the editor (remember that the reporter doesn't write headlines) before the scores are released, explain your concerns about headlines (don't be combative), and ask that they try to be careful.

How do we cope with reporters who don't know much about testing?

An informal background briefing might work. Several weeks before the scores are released, invite newspaper reporters to a mini-workshop on testing. Also call the executive producers of your local TV news shows. Ask who's going to cover your upcoming test score release and invite those people, too. Think of the points you want to get across to the reporter and prepare a concise lecture. Explain how testing is done, how the scores are tabulated,

and what the scores mean. Review basic statistical concepts (e.g., mean, median, percentile). Make sure that this happens before the scores are released and see that they are released in such a way that the reporter has enough time to write a good story. The newspaper and TV stations may not all send staff to your workshop, but at least you will have done whatever you could to ensure accurate reporting.

What other suggestions do you have for test directors?

Suggest sidebar material on the factors responsible for the test scores. Point out possible human interest stories. Remind reports that test scores, like other measures, aren't exact; give them some idea of what might happen to a score if a student answers one or two more questions right. Be informative and be specific.

Most of all, try to establish a good relationship with your newspaper reporters and local TV news management. Give them ideas for stories and if one reporter or producer doesn't seem interested, try another. It is possible to get positive stories in the newspapers and on the air, but it's sometimes necessary to point the news people in the right direction.